The Great American Novel Will Not Be Substacked

Valerie Stivers

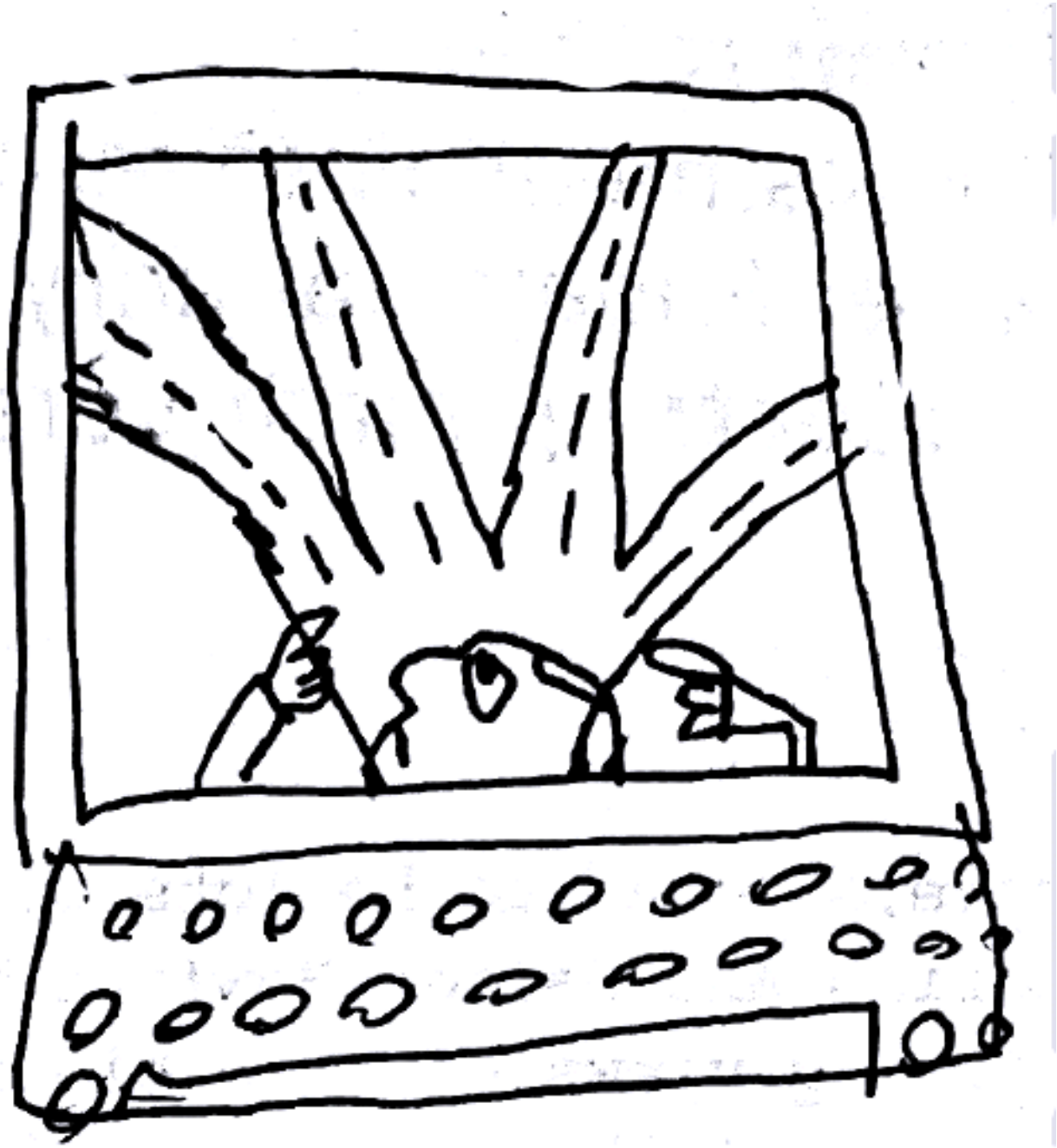

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ILLUSTRATION: SCOTT MENCHIN

Major Arcana

By John Pistelli

Belt Publishing, 352 pages, $24.95

There's been a recent trend of writers, mostly men, asserting the need for a new kind of fiction writing that will supposedly fix the publishing industry and draw in new readers. I am sympathetic to this movement, which I have been informally labeling "rebellion literature." The better versions of it go beyond the standard anti-woke or reactionary talking points to offer ideas about what a renewal of the novel would look like. *Metropolitan Review* editor and novelist Ross Barkan has suggested we might pull inspiration from the classics, move past the novel of consciousness and its autofictional heirs, and tackle bigger themes in an epic, maximalist style. The writer Alex Perez (like Barkan, a *Compact* contributor) believes that "male and working-class fiction, especially working class of any gender would bring in more readers," as he told me over DMs—a crystallization of points he has made previously in more provocative terms. Karl Wenclas, editor of the Detroit-based small press New Pop Lit, goes short instead of long but has a similar urge for innovation. His press, he says, is "reinventing the short story" and is looking for stories relevant to the cultural moment that also offer "ways to better reach general readers." He's not afraid of mashing up genre elements and literary ones, and notes that "literary writers should not be averse to the use of plot."

These strike me as promising directions for fiction to move in, and I would love to see such efforts succeed. So I was interested to read *Major Arcana*, a new novel by academic and critic John Pistelli that Barkan has said hits the mark; he has called the book "the elusive Great American Novel for the twenty-first century" and "better than almost any fiction being produced today." *Major Arcana* is also on-trend for a literary movement that operates mostly outside of traditional publishing: It was originally serialized on Substack and then self-published on Amazon prior to being picked up by the small Cleveland-based Belt Publishing. Many of rebellion lit's adherents believe that major publishing houses won't publish groundbreaking new work anymore, so people should just get it out there themselves.

“I feel it is time to face some harsh truths regarding this kind of gonzo publishing.”

But after reading *Major Arcana*, I feel it is time to face some harsh truths regarding this kind of gonzo publishing. The painful fact is that these books are often poorly written, for what I suspect are a number of reasons. The writers aren’t seeing the books’ flaws, and the editors aren’t seeing them either. Friends and critics are being too soft. Prose standards have degraded in journalism and in all written communication, so fewer people know how to look critically at a sentence anymore. And the mission itself is harder. Epic narrative fiction requires skills and ways of thinking that have been mostly lost in the age of autofiction: multiple characters, narrative strategies, multi-layered plots, action that happens in-scene as opposed to first-person narration, the manipulation of time. This is not to say it’s easy to write a great novel of consciousness, but it’s probably somewhat easier to write a passable one, especially when you’ve dispensed with the old-fashioned demand of grabbing the reader.

Major Arcana is supposed to be a sprawling, American-gothic saga about a comic-book writer turned adjunct professor teaching “Studies in the Graphic Novel.” Pistelli has some interesting ideas—the emphasis on the occult is a rich direction; and I also thought he navigated the post-woke moment deftly, without being didactic about it. But ideas can’t fully form without careful execution on the prose level. And that is what this book lacks.

Here’s the first paragraph:

> He pulled the revolver from his army jacket. That was the first strange thing bystanders reported witnessing before they saw the gun: the olive drab World War II “Ike” jacket with its large front pockets and gold insignia on the lapel. Oversized, it hung oddly, unbuttoned, over his t-shirt and jeans.

A rigorous editor might observe that the pronoun "That" in the second sentence could refer either to the army jacket or to the entire first sentence, with the whole sentence being the more natural expectation, since pulling a gun is "strange" and an army jacket is not. The reader stumbles and has to read the sentence again. Moving forward, the verb choice for the gerund in the phrase "bystanders reported witnessing [the jacket]" is slightly off—you might have *noticed* a jacket, but before you saw the gun you weren't "witnessing" it.

We could go on. A reader picturing an army jacket has likely already pictured "large front pockets" and perhaps even "gold insignia," making the description seem unnecessary. The concluding sentence, starting with, "Oversized, it hung oddly, unbuttoned" puffs something up out of nothing. Is there anything odd about the way an unbuttoned army jacket could hang? Have any of us ever seen that? The guy is not later revealed to be a hunchback. Maybe the suggestion is that there's a gun in the pocket, but the gun is later described as small, and again, who has looked around noticing askew clothing because people have things in their pockets?

I could red-pencil many other paragraphs in *Major Arcana* with similar results, but the problem is larger. The incident with the gun introduces some interesting themes: The young man in the army jacket is a college student, and he kills himself on campus while his girlfriend films it on her phone. In the next section, one of the young man's professors, a comic-book writer named Simon Magnus, who is the book's real protagonist, is subjected to an academic witch hunt for being a bad influence on his student. But Pistelli follows this up with two sections of backstory. Half of Part One introduces the suicide's mother and tells us all about her childhood and personal history. Part Two recounts the significant events in Magnus's life up until that point, including the childhood histories of Magnus, his ex-girlfriends, and all the other characters who will eventually be relevant to the suicide.

Some of this has potential, but it's structured all wrong. Backstory is not plot. Pistelli says he is influenced by the classics, but he seems not to have a sense of how classic novels move their plots forward. Of course, he has also said he's influenced by the great modernists, but an inciting incident plus 184 pages of backstory isn't the structure of a radical modernist novel either. It's just amateurish.

I hate to pick on Pistelli, because *Major Arcana* is still better than many novels being published by small presses. I have a pile of hyped galleys sitting next to me, and the prose is downright bad in all but one of them (which, actually, turns out to be from Penguin). This doesn't mean that these writers don't have potential; I think the rebellion-lit folks *do* have more ideas and more vision than the mainstream. Pistelli has some nice turns of phrase, if he could sift them out and identify them. And I personally like reading small-press books, with all their flaws, more than the conformist new releases from major publishers. But the rebellion-lit pitch—the books are great and publishers (and the reading masses) just don't appreciate them—is dead wrong.

Philip Roth is often held up as the kind of readable, brilliant, culturally relevant, rule-breaking Great American Novel writer whose inspiration we need to return to. So it's worth pointing out that one of Roth's major themes was the miserable, life-sucking, time-sucking, *difficulty* of writing. Roth's biographer Blake Bailey quotes the author's speech from the 2002 National Book Awards, where he received a lifetime achievement award. In that speech, Roth celebrated "the ruthless intimacy of literature, its concreteness, its unabashed focus on all the particulars," and also the "passion for the singular and the aversion to generality that is fiction's lifeblood." He meant, of course, finding the *right* particulars, the singular detail that tells the story, as opposed to all the millions of details that don't—the guy's army jacket, for example.

Literary fiction *is* in trouble, and we do need new voices and new directions. But they need to go full Roth on it, and they haven't yet.

Valerie Stivers, a former *Compact* columnist, cooks from literature for *Our Sunday Visitor*.

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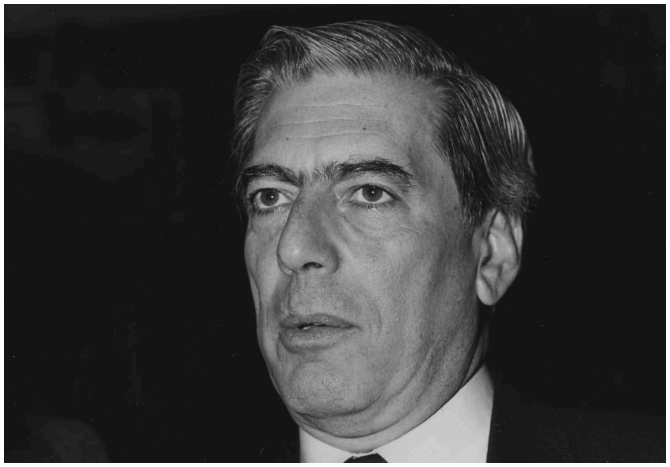

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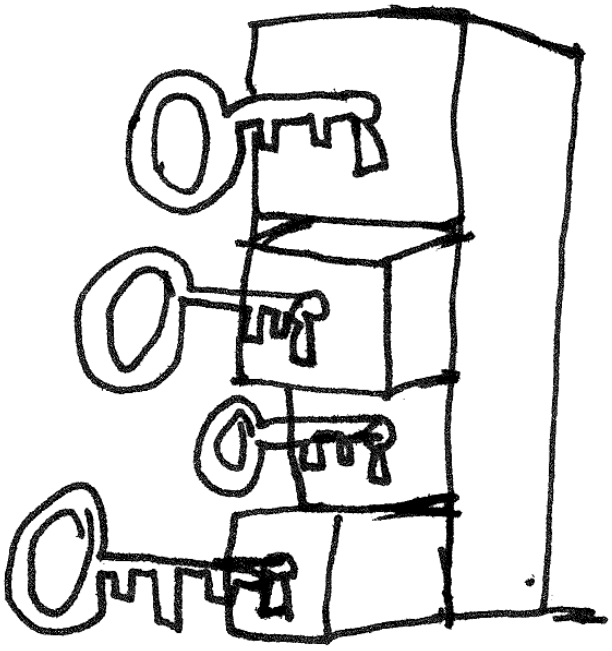

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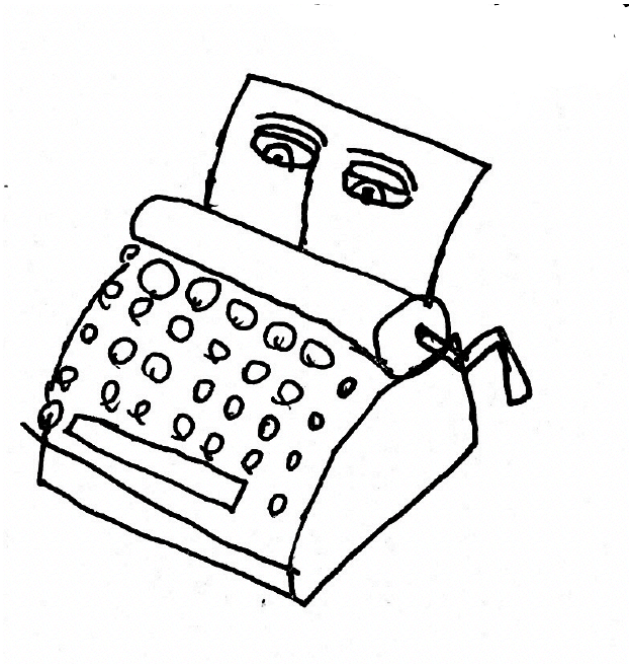

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